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*“A Dynamite Outrage Must Be Provoked”:  
Representations of Anarchism in Joseph  
Conrad’s The Secret Agent*

On February 15, 1894 a powerful explosion shook the air in Greenwich Park. According to a report published the next day in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the first person to arrive on the scene of the incident:

found a man half-crouching on the ground, alternately moaning and screaming. His legs were shattered, one arm was blown away, and the stomach and abdomen were ripped up, slashed and torn in a dreadful fashion.<sup>1</sup>

The man was taken to hospital to die. Police investigators discovered later that his name was Martial Bourdin, and that he was a Frenchman connected with London anarchist circles. Apparently, on that fateful afternoon he was walking through Greenwich Park carrying a bomb which exploded prematurely. Why this happened and what exactly his intentions were has remained a mystery to this day. The incident, which came to be known as

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<sup>1</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 Feb. 1894: 7, qtd. in: D. Mulry, “Popular Accounts of the Greenwich Bombing and Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*” <<http://rmmla.wsu.edu/ereview/54.2/articles/mulry.asp>>.

"The Greenwich Bombing"(or "Bourdin's Folly"), caused considerable hysteria in the press and alarmed British public opinion. It stirred fresh memories of a series of bomb outrages in Britain between the 1860s and 1880s. After the invention of dynamite by Alfred Nobel in 1866 various extremist groups all over Europe used terror as a way to fight for their rights. The explosions that troubled Victorian Britain were mostly linked to the activities of a militant fraction of the Irish Home Rule movement, but among members of the middle class there was also widespread anxiety about the possibility of revolution. At the turn of the century Britain was regarded as haven for subversive political refugees and, as a result, popular imagination was haunted by the fear that dangerous ideas imported from the Continent might threaten the fragile stability of British society.

The Greenwich bombing became a source of inspiration for Conrad, although, as he admits in the author's note to *The Secret Agent*, it "was a blood stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought" (5).<sup>2</sup> But even if the circumstances surrounding the event were veiled in secrecy and its political significance could only be speculated about, the explosion was a chilling memento of the insecurity of modern social order. The metropolitan London of *The Secret Agent* becomes a metaphor for this order: as Verloc walks through the city on his way to the Embassy, he notices some idle rich strolling through Hyde Park and surveys the splendour of bourgeois households "with an approving eye," but he also realises that "protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury" (19). The privileged classes, together with their material possessions, must be carefully guarded against the envy of the dispossessed ("unhygienic" proletariat), who, incited

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<sup>2</sup>All textual references are to J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2000).

by some subversive ideology, might manifest their discontent by resorting to violence.

Conrad chooses late nineteenth-century London, which on the surface seems to be an oasis of complacent idleness and middle class respectability, for the setting of his tale of international conspiracy, police spies and secret organizations. He invites us to explore the underworld, hidden beneath the civilised façade, full of disruptive potential, possibly harbouring a counter culture. Bearing in mind that *The Secret Agent* is not a typical spy story and that it does not match the normal expectations of sensational literature, we may find it interesting to see how Conrad constructs the underworld and the characters that inhabit it.

The novel's engagement with anarchism is to some degree a reflection of the fear of revolution and leftist ideology which could disturb or even prevent the consolidation of capitalism in western Europe at the turn of the century. Diminution and negative stereotyping of anarchy as well as setting it in opposition to middle class culture was in fact a popular tendency in British literature: many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors, from Matthew Arnold, through Stevenson and Henry James, down to Chesterton, saw anarchism as cultural threat and either satirised it or condemned it. For example, Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* is a comic representation of the activities of an anarchist group whose members turn out to be policemen in disguise spying on one another. From Chesterton's Catholic perspective anarchism is portrayed as a form of spiritual fakery as well as conspiracy against civilisation.

*The Secret Agent* continues the tradition of anti-anarchist writing in that the revolutionaries featuring in the book receive satirical treatment. They are described as incompetent, verbose and fraudulent: they fail to practise what they preach and are not truly committed to the idea of social change. Each of the three characters who belong to Verloc's anarchist circle represents a differ-

ent version of left-wing ideology. Michaelis is a utopian Marxist, Alexander Ossipon – a scientific revolutionary, whereas Karl Yundt calls himself a terrorist and advocates “propaganda by the deed” but has “never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice” (43). All of them contribute articles to anarchist press (although their pamphlets do not sell) but in fact they are incapable of communicating even with one another. Whenever they meet, they seem to talk at cross purposes, too self-absorbed to properly exchange ideas. Their anarchism is more psychological than political – it manifests itself in extreme individualism: in the inflated ego they seek to promote. The comic effect that Conrad achieves in his representation of the three revolutionaries is further reinforced by their bodily deformity. Michaelis is overweight and physically inert while Karl Yundt is senile and toothless (just like his propaganda). Ossipon, fascinated with theories of the Italian psychiatrist Lombroso who detected “born criminals” on the basis of physiognomy, himself possesses the facial features of a degenerate.

None of these characters has anything to do with the explosion in Greenwich Park (if we exclude the influence their words exert on Stevie): they are taken aback when the news of the incident reaches them. Ossipon, who, like most ordinary London citizens, learns about the outrage from a newspaper boy in the street feels unprepared to receive such information, and is “very much startled and upset” (54). He needs to calm himself down with a mug of beer in a nearby pub. His reaction is indicative of a wider phenomenon: the fact that London anarchists share many similarities with representatives of bourgeois culture – the very culture they oppose. Pretending to be sinister conspirators, they are opportunists, obsequious in the face of privilege and eager to mix with members of polite society. Their conformism is best exemplified by their dependence on women: Michaelis owes his well-being to his lady-patroness, Yundt survives thanks to the mercy of an old

devotee and Ossipon lives off the bank savings of the girls he manages to seduce. It would be hard to disagree with the Professor who thus dismisses the attitudes of the anarchist group:

. . . you are unable to think independently as any respectable journalist or grocer of them all . . . you have no character whatsoever . . . you revolutionists are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you, slaves of it as much as the very police that stand up in defence of that convention. (58)

As long as Conrad satirises anarchism as a form of self-deception, his critique of subversive politics falls in with the tendencies present in literature of his time. The seemingly disruptive ideology is rendered impotent: sham revolutionaries meeting in the house of a police spy cannot constitute a danger for society. Closing the door behind his three anarchist friends Verloc finds them "hopelessly futile" (48), knowing that they will prove useless for his task of organising a dynamite provocation. Yet the bomb in Greenwich Park does explode, which suggests that anarchy cannot be so easily dismissed as unthreatening.

The only representative of the underworld on whom Verloc can rely is the Professor – "the perfect anarchist" (76), or rather a terrorist, willing to unleash forces of destruction. Capable and industrious, he is completely devoted to his quest for an ideal detonator. Unlike Michaelis, Yundt or Ossipon, the Professor will not disgrace himself with a compromise even if he has no money for his dangerous chemicals. What fascinates him is violence for its own sake: his readiness to commit suicide by blowing himself up in a street full of people becomes the source of his strength. By wiring explosives to his own body he places himself outside the law (he knows that the police will not risk arresting him) and defies the authority of the existing social order. He is the ultimate anarchist in the sense that he is not constrained by the power of the

state, although the price he pays for his freedom includes the possibility of self-destruction. At the same time, his anarchism verges on madness and is not so much a result of his political convictions as of his misanthropy. He brings to mind Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* as he pronounces his hatred of "the weak, the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart, and the slavish of mind" (215). At the end of the book, while he "averts his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind," he mixes with the crowd and becomes "a force," passing "unsuspected and deadly," "terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world" (220).

The introduction of the figure of the Professor adds an air of menace to the plot and allows Conrad to speculate about the destructive potential of anarchist ideology taken to extremes. Like most fanatics, the restless bomb constructor wants to wipe out the present society but has no clear vision as to what could come in its place. Generally, it seems that *The Secret Agent* dismisses anarchism as an ideology that cannot offer a viable alternative to traditional social organisation. Yet even if Conrad's representation of the subversive politics is essentially negative (or even reactionary), he does not set the movement in opposition to bourgeois culture, and he certainly does not embrace capitalist or democratic values. In this respect he differs from other writers who at the turn of the century tackled the subject of anarchism. According to Conrad, it is not so much the activities of anarchist groups that threaten social stability, but their presence, which creates the danger of intervention on the part of foreign imperialism. After all, the agent that stands ultimately behind the outrage in Greenwich Park is linked to autocratic regime. The bomb goes out at the request of Mr. Vladimir who does not want to bring about a collapse of authority but an introduction of repressive, anti-anarchist legislation. If the use of violence by the revolutionaries deserves condemnation, so does the bombing planned by a foreign government, or

any government at all. Conrad as a social critic is wary of simplistic dichotomies: he recognises the flaws of various political systems but refrains from privileging democracy over autocracy and capitalism over socialism, or vice versa.

*The Secret Agent* lacks a clear ideological base – it is not Conrad's intention to propose a recipe for social change. Instead, he extends his criticism to different social strata and political options in an attempt to expose degeneracy which permeates modern world. People who uphold the existing civilisation do not articulate values that would be alternative to those advocated by the enemies of the system. Conrad's book shatters the stereotypical constructs of a spy story: the anarchists do not stand in direct opposition to the police and the officials of the liberal government. On the contrary, the two mutually exclusive worlds begin to infiltrate one another. The guardians of the social order behave in a manner that would become representative of the underworld: Chief Inspector Heat owes his professional success to underhand dealings and secret connections/informers while the Assistant Commissioner can only solve the mystery of the bombing acting "as though he was a member of the criminal classes" (112). Both policemen seem to operate outside the law – their decisions about whom to prosecute are purely arbitrary, guided by selfish motives. Heat wants to incriminate Michaelis as the most probable suspect and is ready to fabricate the proofs of his guilt in order to confirm his reputation of an efficient officer. At the same time, the Assistant Commissioner does not allow for the arrest of Michaelis not because the man is innocent but because Michaelis's lady-patroness happens to be the best friend of the Assistant's wife. The anarchists and the police frequent the same social circles, which suggests that they in fact belong to the same "class." As the Professor observes early in the novel: "The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality – counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical" (58). A similar claim

comes from Heat who puts a sign of equation between himself and the criminals he is supposed to catch: "products of the same machine, one classed as useful and the other as noxious, they take the machine for granted in different ways, but with a seriousness essentially the same" (74).

By undercutting the differences between the characters representing the opposing ends of social spectrum Conrad destroys the safety of our logical categorisation and shows how the division into good and evil, "useful and noxious" becomes purely a question of designation. Whether we find ourselves on this side or on the other depends on chance: the infernal machine denies our individuality, we are caught in the web of history and politics, small cogs in a big wheel that spins irrespectively of our intentions, in the direction we are not able to define. Aware of the limitations of human mind, Conrad withdraws from passing judgements and giving solutions. He does not declare his enthusiasm for any particular ideology, thus manifesting his scepticism about substituting one political system for another. Nor does he leave us much hope, reducing people to puppets in the hands of fate, self-deluded, vulnerable, but also egoistic, incapable of disinterested gestures. This pessimistic vision of mankind is confirmed by the novel's ending, and the closing scene in particular when we are forced to recognise the destructive potential latent in all human communities. The frail body of the Professor which melts into the metropolitan crowd symbolises the forces of anarchy endemic to any society. Unaware of the enemy within, people cherish the illusion of safety, confidently taking another step forward, perceiving their world as their own, their Greenwiches eternal and their World Trade Centres indestructible. Conrad tries to remind us that within all forms of social organisation there hides a radical Professor or a fanatical Mr. Vladimir, waiting for violence to spill out, knowing that an act of destruction is truly terrifying only when it is "incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact, mad" (33).



Although at the end of the author's note Conrad claims that when writing *The Secret Agent* he had not intended to commit "a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind" (8), he does throw a bomb at our personal paradigm of values and convictions. He casts doubt on our ability to make straightforward moral judgments and undermines our possibilities of evaluation. His tale has no heroes, offers no consolation, no ready answers that would ease our sense of deprivation. Greenwich, which symbolizes human craving for harmony, the need to create models and refer to them when in doubt, becomes shattered by the unpredictability and uniqueness of each individual's predicament. In a sense, then, Conrad becomes an emissary of the underworld – as a true modernist, a child of his epoch, he exposes anarchy and incomprehensibility inherent in reality. His story seems grisly because it does not satisfy the needs of the reader in the sense that we cannot truly identify with any of the characters, and we cannot consistently place our trust in any inhabitants of the monstrous, gloomy city, maybe except for Stevie who himself intuits the chaotic (as it is manifested by his circle drawing) and becomes devoured by it.